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ABSTRACT

This report describes a program for advancing written expression skills in the primary grades. Extensive research over the past years has shown that an emphasis on mechanics and conventions inhibits the process of writing in primary students. The targeted population consisted of first and second grade students in a middle class community, located in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois. The problems of written expression and students' motivation to produce quality written assignments have become a national concern given mandated testing, benchmarks, and standards. Analysis of probable cause data revealed that not only do students view writing as a difficult task, but societal trends toward new forms of communication, de-emphasis of the skill of communicating through written language, the amount of time spent practicing writing skills in isolation, and emphasis placed on editing and revision processes, all contribute to writing problems. Teachers at the targeted school reported varying amounts of time spent on writing as well as varied methods for teaching writing. The principal expressed a concern over the lack of scope and sequence in the current writing program adopted at the targeted school. These concerns were addressed using a writer's workshop format, mini-lessons, modeled writing, and limited editing and revisions. Writing samples were collected throughout the research project to assess student growth. Findings suggest that the Action Plan implemented was successful in increasing writing fluency. On four dimensions of writing fluency, both first and second grade students not only increased the amount of words written, but also elaborated on the content itself. Given this increase, students also constructed more mature wording; therefore, their writing sequence also increased. This was due to the many positive writing experiences in which students participated. Results show that students also expressed increased enjoyment when writing. (Contains 12 references and 6 tables of data. Appendixes contain student and teacher writing survey instruments and three story starters.) (Author/RS)

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IMPROVING WRITTEN LANGUAGE SKILLS IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

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Susan Wetzel

An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of master of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

Saint Xavier University & IRI/Skylight

Field-Based Masters Program

Chicago, Illinois

December, 2001

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ABSTRACT

This report describes a program for advancing written expression skills in the primary grades. Extensive research over the past years has shown that an emphasis on mechanics and conventions inhibits the process of writing in primary students. The targeted population consisted of First and Second grade students in a middle class community, located in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois. The problems of written expression and students' motivation to produce quality written assignments have become a national concern given mandated testing, benchmarks, and standards.

Analysis of probable cause data revealed that not only do students view writing as a difficult task, but societal trends toward new forms of communication, de-emphasis of the skill of communicating through written language, the amount of time spent practicing writing skills in isolation, and emphasis placed on editing and revision processes, all contribute to writing problems. Teachers at the ta eted school reported varying amounts of time spent on writing as well as varied methods fo teaching writing. The Principal expressed a concern over the lack of scope and sequence in the current writing program adopted at the targeted school. These concerns were addressed using a Writer's Workshop format (including Author's Chair), Mini-lessons, modeled writing, and limited editing and revisions. Writing samples were collected throughout the research project to assess student growth.

Findings suggest that the Action Plan implemented was successful in increasing writing fluency. On four dimensions of writing fluency, both First and Second Grade students not only increased the amount of words written, but also elaborated on the content itself. Given this increase, students also constructed more mature wording; therefore, their writing sequence also increased. This was due to the many positive writing experiences in which students participated. Results show that students also expressed increased enjoyment when writing.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

"How long does it have to be?" When students are asked to perform writing tasks, this is probably their most common response. Teachers perceive that too many students at the primary level do not enjoy or perform well on written expression tasks. Primary students frequently express negative feelings about writing, and complain that they can't think of anything to write about or that they have nothing to say. These student responses lead to questions such as:

* Why do students view writing as a painful process or task?

* Is an emphasis on mechanics and conventions inhibiting the process?

* If students find enjoyment and fun in writing, will the application of mechanics and conventions be more naturally applied?

* Will their writing improve as a result?

This Action Research Project is intended to address these questions.

Immediate Problem Context

National Context of the Problem

In recent decades, educators have been concerned with the quality of writing by elementary age children. McCaig (1982), stated that the inability of students to compose passages of written English is a national disgrace and a source of outrage in communities throughout the country. This concern created a flurry of competency testing now required by many states. Researchers have developed lists of skills that must be taught to children as they are becoming writers. These skill lists usually involve record keeping systems, as well as mandated testing. Teachers and children can be so worried about completing worksheets and record keeping, that there is little time for the enjoyment of writing. "Studies show that most writing time is devoted to mechanical chores. Only 3% of the school day is actually spent on composing" (Calkins, 1985, p. 63). According to The Writing Report Card-Writing Achievement in American School, from the Educational Testing Service, "Students' positive attitudes towards writing deteriorate steadily across the grades. Students also report that their teachers are more likely to mark mistakes than to show an interest in what they write or to make suggestions for the next paper " (1985 p. 234). Yet, Graves (1985), points out "Writing experts believe that one way to improve the quality of students' writing is to spend more time on composing and less time practicing isolated skills, that is: punctuation, capitals, grammar, spelling and legality" (p. 224).

Historically there have been two schools of thought on the methods of teaching writing skills: a traditional approach, which emphasizes the conventions and mechanics of writing, or a holistic approach, which emphasizes content and meaning. "The writing that goes on in

classrooms must be relevant to students if they are to become engaged in and value the process. Practicing writing through exercise, skill sheets, and isolated activities does not produce good writers and, in fact, is not real writing. Our focus must be on writing for real purposes" (Routman, 1991,p.170). Since the debate about which approach is more successful continues, the educational pendulum continues to swing back and forth between the two approaches.

With the advent of new state testing, benchmarks and standards, much teacher attention has focused on student products which demonstrate the highly formatted styles of writing which are assessed through state mandated competency tests. The national trend toward formal or normed writing assessments indicates the emphasis currently given to writing skills. At the elementary level the stress on mechanics and writing conventions may cause both meaning and content to become less important in the eyes of both the writer and the teacher.

Writing instruction continues to be an area of concern for many elementary school teachers. Many express frustration over their students' lack of interest in writing and in the low quality of the completed writing assignments. Teaching writing is challenging and the task is further complicated because teachers read and receive conflicting information on the best methods. Perhaps if children are given the opportunity to develop and gain confidence in their craft as writers, the mechanics and conventions can begin to be taught in a more purposeful context.

Demographics of The School Population

The targeted school is an elementary building within a district composed of four elementary buildings and one Junior High School. The grades include kindergarten through sixth grade. According to the 2000 Illinois School Report Card the school had an enrollment of 513 students, with the following racial/ethnic background:

* White 87.1 %
* Black 8.0 %
* Hispanic 2.9 %
* Asian 2.1 %

Additional pertinent data include the following:

- Low Income 5.5 %
- Limited English Proficient 2.7 %
- Attendance Rate 97 %
- Mobility 8.1 %
- Truancy 0
- District's Instructional Expenditure per Pupil $4,145

The faculty has one Principal, one Assistant Principal, 22 classroom teachers, 6 resource teachers, 1 Behavior Support Teacher, 2 Speech teachers, 2 Physical education teachers, 1 Art teacher, and 8 classroom aides (some are full inclusion aides). The average teaching experience within the district is 13.6 years, and 66.3% of the teachers within the district hold a Master's Degree. The average class sizes are as follows:

- Kindergarten - 20.7
- First Grade - 20.8
- Third Grade - 24.7

- Sixth Grade - 24.7

The school was built in 1922 and is a three-story brick structure that has been renovated many times. The school is surrounded by both homes and businesses.

The school currently offers the following programs:

- BASE - Before and After School Education
- Foreign language classes
- Lunch program
- Drug awareness program
- CDP - Child Development Project
- Early childhood program
- Student Council
- Chorus and instrumental music

Demographics of The Surrounding Community

The town in which the school is located is a western suburb of a large midwest city, and covers 2.5 square miles. The current population is 15,362. The mean household income is $59,579, with the median house value at $167,294. The median contract rent is $531. The educational background for this community is somewhat diverse:

- Less than high school diploma 6.5 %
- Completed secondary degree 13%
- Completed associate degree 3%

- Completed bachelors degree 19 %

- Completed graduate degree 12 %

These statistics reveal that almost one-third of the residents in this community have had higher education experiences.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

The targeted population includes a First Grade class consisting of 18 children, and a Second Grade classroom consisting of 21 children. The First Grade population includes four students enrolled in an early literacy program and another student currently being monitored for possible Special Education services. The Second Grade classroom has four children who receive support services because they perform well below grade level expectations in reading and Language Arts and a student who has an IEP requiring in-class support for written language.

The following tools were used to examine the issues related to writing instruction at the targeted school: student survey, teacher questionnaire, Principal interview, and student portfolio samples. The school's most current ISAT scores were also a determining factor in researching the problem.

Student Survey

The following information was gathered from a student survey given at the end of

September (see Appendix A). It is interesting to note that in both classes, the students appear to be split equally in opinions. In the targeted First Grade classroom, an average of 12 of the 18 students expressed an enjoyment of writing, but 13 seemed to also view it as a difficult task. The survey also indicated that 13 of the First Grade students prefer to choose their own topics and and that 13 students like to share their writing. The results are summarized in Figure 1, below.

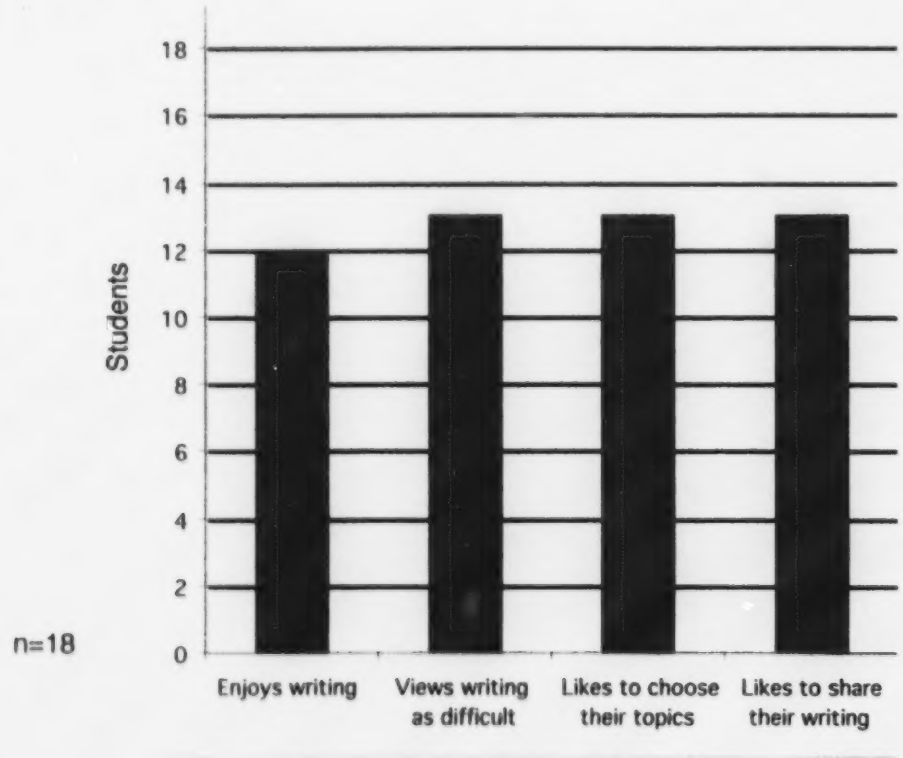

Figure 1. First Grade, Fall writing survey results

In the targeted Second Grade classroom, 13 of the 21 students indicated they enjoyed writing, and of the same 21 students, 12 viewed writing as a difficult task (see Appendix A). Thirteen of the Second Grade students like to choose what they are going to write about, and 13 indicated that they like to share their writing. The results are summarized in Figure 2, below.

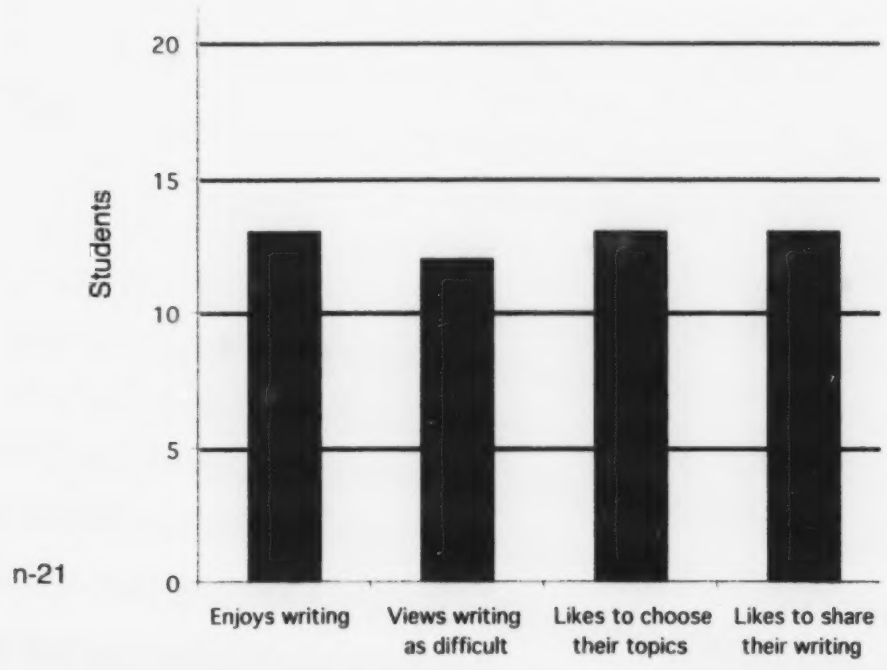

Figure 2. Second Grade, Fall writing survey results

Teacher Survey

Eight teacher surveys were distributed and collected (Appendix B). The teachers reported the following information:

Six of the eight felt that ISAT testing and scores influence the way they teach writing.

Five of the eight felt that ISAT testing and scores influence the amount of time they spend teaching writing.

All eight reported that they are comfortable allowing students to use invented spelling.

Seven of the eight reported that they often allow children to write without being edited.

Four of the eight teachers reported that students sometimes lack motivation during free writing opportunities and one reported that students frequently lack motivation during free writing time.

Two of the eight reported they frequently provide prompts for their students' writing and six reported that they sometimes provide writing prompts.

Seven of the eight teachers indicated that creativity in their student's writing was very important.

Six of the eight teachers reported their students as having an enthusiastic attitude towards writing.

According to seven of the eight teachers, the average amount of time spent on writing activities as approximately three hours per week.

The results of the survey seem (see Figure 3, below) to indicate that the First and Second Grade teachers at the targeted school find that their writing instruction is impacted by ISAT test results. Most teachers indicated that there are times when they are comfortable with unedited student writing and inventive spelling. Most of them also reported that they do not generally use prompts in their writing assignments. During free writing opportunities, the teachers found their students sometimes lack motivation.

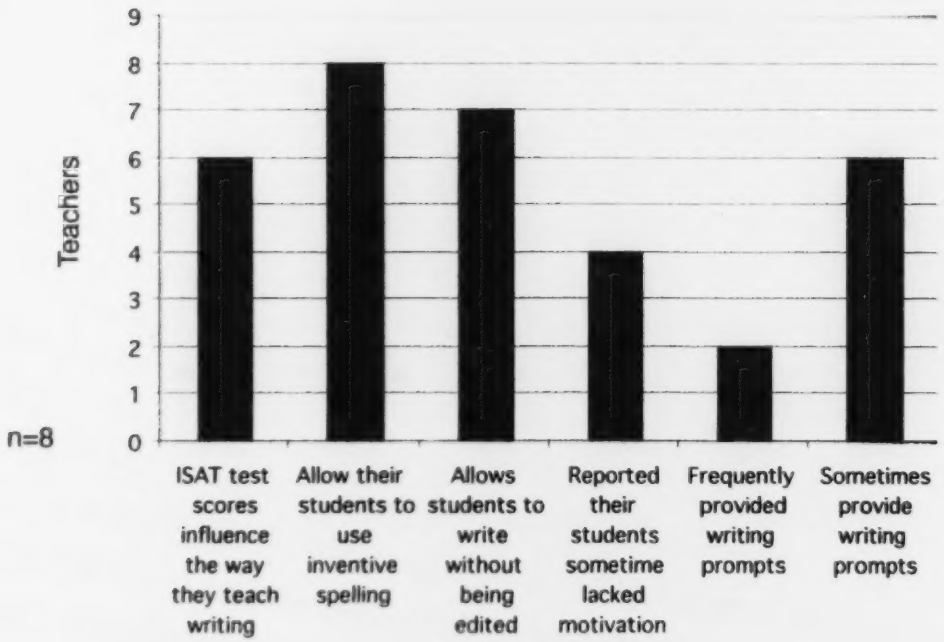

Figure 3. Teacher Survey, student writing

Administrative Interview

In an interview, the Principal at the targeted school explained that staff concern over writing performance led to a school-wide goal intended to improve written language skills. As part of the targeted school's site-based plan, the following goal was developed: To improve written expression in the areas of focus, organization, integration, and support, as well as the area of writing mechanics.

The steps adopted to reach the goal include:

Grade level development of a plan to achieve goal including use of current available resources and activities

Articulation between grade levels regarding the plan

Working in concert with the assessments developed by the District Language Arts Committee, assessments will be used at each grade level

Use of ISAT and ITBS as another means of assessment of progress toward this goal. ISAT goal is to have all non-IEP students score in the "meet" and "exceed" categories, with an increase in the number of students scoring in the "exceeds" category.

The Principal stated, " Teachers expressed concern over the lack of a scope and sequence for instruction in the area of writing, the lack of assessment in the area of writing, and a general concern over how instruction was being delivered." When addressing the impact of ISAT scores on curricular decisions, the Principal indicated that teachers may need to use scores to help evaluate students' strengths and weaknesses and to use the reported test information for prevention, as well as correction, of problems. The Principal expressed the opinion that schools need to have a well developed, sound writing curriculum which will prove the children to be good writers on any measure.

The Principal also stated that schools which devote a great deal of time coaching students on the three kinds of writing used on the ISAT score higher on the test, but acknowledged that this can produce stilted and highly formulaic writing. She believes that it is important to teach expository, narrative, and persuasive writing, as well as the needed conventions at all grade levels; but, given the ever-changing nature of the ISAT, acknowledged that it would be foolish to base a curriculum on the test.

The Principal explained that, throughout the district, writing skills are currently being addressed with the use of rubrics created by district teachers. These rubrics were developed through the use of writing samples collected from each school and grade level in order to determine consistent standards for evaluation. Each teacher received samples of student writing rated as low, average, or high, as well as the rubrics created for the various types of writing assignments.

The Third Grade test scores for the 2000 ISAT are as follows (data gathered from the 91% tested):

- Academic Warning 1%
- Below Standards 31%
- Meets Standards 61%
- Exceeds Standards 6%

In sum, the combination of ISAT scores and school goals combine to drive the writing curriculum. While there are valid reasons to emphasize state standards and school initiatives, it may well be that the joy of writing and creativity could be stifled by teachers' concern with meeting these specifications. This project therefore seeks to expand or reaffirm the creative process, while maintaining expected curriculum goals and benchmarks.

Probable Causes

The survey given to the targeted First and Second Grade classes indicated that approximately half the students viewed writing as a difficult task. Perhaps students have not developed conventional writing skills because they have not found them necessary due to societal trends towards new forms of communication, i.e., computers. It may be that the growth of electronic media has de-emphasized the skill of communicating through written language.

At the targeted school, teachers reported spending varying amounts of time on writing, as well as varied methods for teaching writing. The teachers agreed that improving written expression is important and therefore included this skill as a goal in the site-based plan. Because the targeted school lacks a formal writing curriculum, teachers decided the following steps would improve writing instruction: a) Articulation between grade level teachers regarding written expression in the areas of focus, organization, integration, and support, as well as the area of writing mechanics; and, b) The use of rubric assessments developed by the Language Arts Committee across grade levels.

The Principal of the targeted school expressed a concern over the lack of scope and sequence in the current writing program, and stated the importance of developing methods to teach students writing skills which will enable children to do well on any measure of written language assessment.

The literature suggests several underlying causes for poor written language skills in primary classrooms. Time that might otherwise be spent on a holistic approach to writing and composing may possibly be monopolized by practicing writing skills in isolation with an overemphasis on the mechanical aspects. Creativity and student enthusiasm may be negatively

impacted as more importance is placed on the editing and revision process. Some experts, e.g., Moffett and Wagner (1983), and Newman (1985), share the view that writing may be improved when students are given more time for composition and less time is spent on the teaching of mechanics. According to the view proposed by writing experts from Write Environment Incorporated (2001), students benefit from writing experiences in which they feel free to take risks and experiment with written language. They also benefit when their pieces are not edited because they need praise for effort, rather than a list of mistakes to be corrected.

Information gathered from the Principal, teachers, and students from the targeted school indicates the need for improvement in the area of writing instruction.

CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

"One of the main weaknesses in student writing comes from students' tendency to think of writing only as 'performing for a verdict' rather than 'trying to communicate with actual readers.' For students to find out what their words actually did to readers-even if we think some of those readers have the 'wrong reactions'-often leads to remarkable gain in skill" (Elbow,1986, as cited by Spandel and Stiggens, 1997, p.102).

The following strategies were used to enhance the development of the writing process: Writer's Workshop, Author's Chair, Mini-lessons, and teacher-modeled writing.

Writer's Workshop

The Workshop promotes student ownership and active learning while putting an emphasis on student involvement in the writing process and less emphasis on teacher editing and revision. Students need time to investigate and expand their writing abilities without restrictive guidelines. Writing can be more enjoyable and meaningful to students if they are allowed to choose topics which are important to them. "If students are not engaged in writing at least four days out of five, and for a period of thirty-five to forty minutes, beginning in first grade, they will have little opportunity to learn to think through the medium of writing " (Graves, as cited by Routman,1996, p. 86-87). Students should become comfortable expressing

their ideas in written, as well as verbal, form.

The workshop approach provides the students with writing experiences which are personal and authentic.

> "The best language-learning occurs when students attempt actual communication and then see how real listeners/readers react. Arbitrarily assigned topics with no opportunity for choice fail to give students practice in this most crucial step of writing. Meaningful writing tasks bridge the cognitive demands of school and the issues of students' cultures and developing personalities. If the writer has no real commitment to the topic or the audience, he or she cannot interpret feedback effectively to learn about how words communicate between people." (Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 1998, p. 59).

Mini-lessons

During the first 5 minutes of Writer's Workshop, Mini-lessons pull students together, usually to teach specific skills that have come up within the students daily writing. "In mini-lessons, we teach into our students' intentions. Our students are first deeply engaged in their self-sponsored work, and then we bring them together to learn what they need to know in order to do that work. This way, they stand a chance of being active meaning-makers, even during this bit of formal instruction " (Calkins, 1994. p.193-194). The lesson might focus on topics such as: use of quotation marks, adding interesting details, formatting paragraphs, and proper spacing between words.

Author's Chair

When participating in Author's Chair, students share their writing and receive feedback,

not only from the teacher, but from their peers. In turn, they learn to accept praise and take suggestions for their next writing piece. Each student, who has chosen to share a writing piece, during the Author's Chair time, reads his selected piece to the entire class. As students listen to fellow authors, they develop the skill of constructive criticism and may be inspired to experiment with new writing genres. They may also gain insight into the personal lives of their classmates, which can enrich understanding and enhance classroom environment.

Teacher-modeled Writing

"Just as children learn to talk and read, swim or jump rope by imitating people who already know how, they learn to write by mimicking the habits and strategies of real writers. Teachers play a valuable role in this process. By modeling good reading and writing habits, they show students that reading and writing are important activities deserving of their time and attention" (Resnick and Tucker, eds., p.37). It is important for teachers to spend time writing themselves and share their written products with their students, so that the students learn from their process and see that writing is valued by the teacher. Students benefit when they see and hear their teacher think out loud, revise, and edit as they write personal poetry, stories, letters, and reports.

Emphasis on Fluency

The objective of developing fluency can be overshadowed or negated by an overemphasis on the skills of handwriting, grammatical conventions, and spelling. Calkins states that the most important thing we can do for students who struggle in writing is to provide them with opportunities to write "freely and unselfconsciously" (1994, p.290) . When many changes, revisions, and corrections are made by the teacher, a child's sense of ownership regarding his work may be weakened. If the student's focus is on avoiding or correcting errors

himself, he will retain ownership, but fluency becomes secondary.

Action Plan

This following action plan was developed to address three objectives: to increase writing fluency, to build students' confidence in their writing abilities, and to enhance students' enjoyment of writing. The action plan began in January 2001 and was completed in June 2001. The strategies used in the action plan were implemented as part of the Language Arts curriculum.

Writer's Workshop

One to two hours a week was spent in Writer's Workshop. Students use this time to write about topics of their choice. Two methods used to generate possible topics were brainstorming and the use of personal journals. Brief student-teacher conferences were held on as-needed basis. The objective of Writer's Workshop was to increase the students' enjoyment of writing and at the same time raise the students' level of confidence in writing . Another objective for Writer's Workshop was to improve writing fluency, that is, allow students to create without constantly attending to formal conventions, corrections, and re-writes.

Mini-lesson

A five minute Mini-lesson was taught two to three times a week before the start of each Writer's Workshop time. The Mini-lessons focused on problems encountered by students in their writing, and addressed topics such as: adding details, developing characters, and using punctuation. Lessons also included writing good beginnings and endings. Other lessons focused on the analysis of a particular work or author's writing style. The objectives of the Mini-lessons were to increase writing fluency, and by teaching the necessary skills, help students gain confidence in their abilities as writers.

Author's Chair

Two hours a month was devoted to student sharing of completed writing pieces. This time allowed the students to see themselves as authors with a peer and teacher audience. The objective of Author's Chair was to provide an audience who could give positive and specific feedback through questions and comments. This feedback gave the authors ideas for revising their pieces. One of the objectives of Author's Chair was to help students' feel appreciated as writers and thereby gain confidence in their own writing. Another objective of Author's Chair was to increase the level of enjoyment students felt about writing.

Teacher Modeling

On a regular basis, usually twice a week, the teachers in the targeted grades modeled the writing process and shared samples of their personal writing using a variety of topics and genres. The objective of the teacher modeling was to demonstrate how writers think, organize, and revise their writing, thereby increasing fluency.

Assessment

In order to gauge changes in the students' attitudes toward writing , e.g., confidence and enjoyment, a Student Survey will be completed in the targeted classes both prior to the intervention and when the intervention is completed. The survey results will be compared to determine the extent to which students' attitudes were modified. A writing prompt will be administered three times during the intervention. The number of words produced in response to each prompt will be defined as an indicator of student fluency.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of Intervention

The objective of this project was to help students increase in fluency, confidence, and enjoyment of writing. The following strategies were implemented by the teachers in the two targeted classrooms: Writer's Workshop, Author's Chair, Mini-lessons, and Teacher Modeling.

Writer's Workshops were devoted to writing individually selected pieces, such as: stories, plays, poems, and expository pieces. The workshops began with the opportunity for students to generate ideas through brainstorming discussions or journaling. Brainstorming provided the students with many possible writing topics and ideas from which they could choose. Another means of generating writing topics was the use of personal journals. Students were encouraged to personalize their journals by decorating them with meaningful pictures and words. They were encouraged to write short entries about their thoughts, feelings, and questions which were later used to develop longer pieces of writing. Most of the Workshop time was devoted to free choice writing. Students were allowed to leave their desks to work in various places around the classroom and to work on their own or to collaborate with partners or small groups. During the writing time, the teacher frequently conferred with students, providing

feedback to individuals and groups. Since the objective was to develop fluency, these brief conferences were used to ensure that students stayed on task and had opportunities for the teacher to respond to their writing.

Through the use of Writer's Workshop, and Authors' Chair, teachers at the targeted school provided opportunities for students to experiment with different writing topics and genres of their own choosing.

The Teacher Modeled writing and Mini-lessons were employed to promote writing fluency, as students applied the skills and writing processes taught and modeled. Students were led through the development and editing of writing through the teachers' articulation of their thought process and composition as they wrote and edited first drafts. The teachers' writings about their lives and families provided opportunities for students to respond and interact at a personal level with their teachers. The discussions which followed these teacher modeling times encouraged the students to write personal stories based on their own life experiences. The teachers' writing demonstrated that everyday life experiences and daily events can lead to wonderful writing pieces.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

To assess the effectiveness of the action research on the targeted students, various strategies were used along with pre and post- student surveys (Appendix A), and writing samples collected three times throughout the project (Appendices C,D, and E).

All 39 students involved in the program from the targeted First and Second Grade classrooms were given a survey at the beginning and end of the research project. The results

from the pre and post-survey are shown in Figures 4 and 5, p 24, combining data collected into four topical areas. Students in the First Grade classroom expressed a 16% increase in their enjoyment of writing, whereas the Second Grade students showed a 24% increase. The First Grade students showed a 15% decrease in their view of difficulty in writing. The Second Grade class showed no change in their of view themselves as writers. The number of First Grade students who prefer to choose their own writing topics grew by 28% by the end of the research project, whereas the number of Second Grade students who prefer to do so grew by 24%. The number of First Grade students who like to share their writing grew by 6%, whereas the number of Second Grade students who like to share increased by 9%.

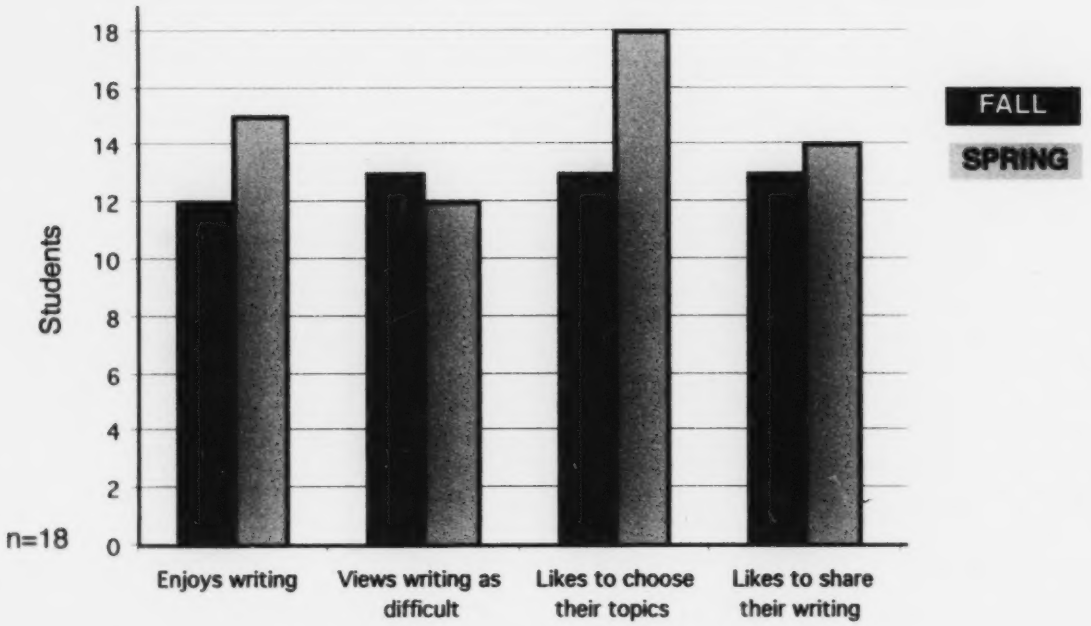

Figure 4. First Grade, Fall and Spring writing survey results

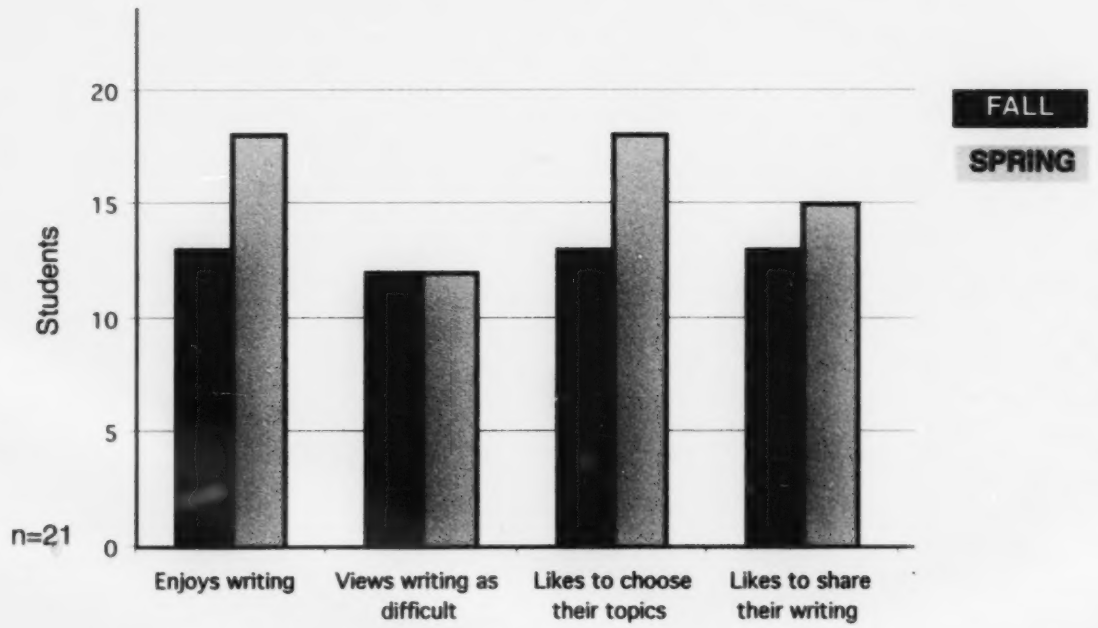

Figure 5. Second Grade, Fall and Spring writing survey results

Writing samples were gathered three times with results shown in Figure 6 (below). The First Grade students' writings showed an increase of 8 words when given a writing prompt and the Second Graders' writing showed an increase of 22 words. There was an improvement in the number of correctly spelled words. In the First Grade, the increase was 9 words; in the Second Grade, it was 20. The targeted First Grade class showed a two word increase in their use of mature words; the Second Grade students showed a four word increase. The First Grade students' writing showed an increase of 10 more word sequences in the spring and the Second Graders' writing showed an increase of 21 word sequences.

FIRST GRADE RESULTS

Writing Sample Months	Total Words Written	Words Spelled Correctly	Mature Words	Writing Sequence
September	13	8	4	5
January	16	10	4	9
May	21	17	6	15
Growth	+8	+9	+2	+10

SECOND GRADE RESULTS

Writing Sample Months	Total Words Written	Words Spelled Correctly	Mature Words	Writing Sequence
September	14	11	6	8
January	31	26	9	22
May	36	31	10	29
Growth	+22	+20	+4	+21

Figure 6. Results of written language samples, Grades 1 and 2

Students expressed a positive outlook about Writer's Workshop and frequently asked for more time to spend writing in this relaxed and positive environment. The workshop experiences appeared to create a great deal of enthusiasm among the students. Most students were eager to share their pieces during the Author's Chair time and many students asked for Writer's Workshop time to be extended or scheduled more often.

The Mini-lessons seemed to be effective because the students were able to immediately apply the skill to their writing. Although the skills taught in the Mini-lessons were not directly assessed in the intervention, it may be that the teaching of writing skills during these lessons had a positive impact upon students' fluency. It appeared that the Mini-lessons helped students become more comfortable with both writing conventions and writing processes.

Discussion

Based on the writing samples and student surveys, the teacher researchers would recommend the intervention used to help students increase writing fluency and enhance the enjoyment of writing. The key element in this Action Plan was the implementation of a Writer's Workshop approach. Many factors of Writer's Workshop contributed to creating a positive writing atmosphere. These included opportunities for students to choose what they wished to write about, with whom they wished to work, and where they would be most comfortable writing. Author's Chair provided students an audience and feedback while promoting a greater commitment to writing. Teaching children to write their thoughts and become comfortable and confident about writing while de-emphasizing handwriting, spelling, and writing conventions appears to increase their writing fluency.

As the students began to gain more understanding of the purposes and became more comfortable with the process of Writer's Workshop, their enthusiasm for writing grew. Many

students were observed writing in their journals throughout the day, including during recess and other free times. Students asked for extended Writer's Workshop times and were disappointed when it was not scheduled. At the beginning of the implementation, students seem to struggle to find topics for writing and had difficulty getting started. At the early stages of the project, the teacher researchers observed that few children shared their writing during the Author's Chair times. As the action plan progressed, students seemed to gain confidence and more began to share their writing.

During the intervention, students began to develop more thoughtful or in-depth questions for the author. The number of students choosing to participate in Author's Chair increased as students found it to be a positive experience. Some students experienced a particularly strong sense of pride and accomplishment while presenting works which had been bound and published.

The results suggest that students in First and Second grade increased writing fluency while demonstrating a greater confidence and enjoyment of writing. As the interventions progressed, the researchers noted one of the factors which may have contributed to these outcomes was the maturation of the targeted students. As the school year progressed, students developed physically, socially, and intellectually, which may have effected their writing ability and attitudes about writing.

Another possible factor for the increase in writing fluency may have been other writing instruction which took place throughout the school day as a part of the normal curriculum. Students frequently wrote in response to topics and subjects presented. They were instructed through guided writing lessons for stories, poems, letters, and expository and persuasive paragraphs. The student's home environment was another possible contributing factor or

variable to student's writing fluency and attitudes. Many students live in a print -rich environment where reading and writing are part of their daily activities. Some of the students may have had support and extra writing experience at home which could effect their academic success and attitudes.

The district where the targeted school is located emphasizes the ISAT writing scores. This seems to create the need to teach guided writing lessons based on the writing styles expected by the tests. This decreases the amount of available Language Arts time which might be devoted to Writer's Workshop, which is most effective when a large block of time is allocated, since students will need to spend time getting prepared to write and engaged in prewriting activities.

The teacher researchers observed that some students seemed to lack motivation and/or direction and the necessary writing skills during workshop time. It was often necessary for teachers to redirect and encourage these students who struggled in this type of writing environment.

Another problem encountered during the intervention was difficulty in scheduling the large blocks of classroom time necessary to effectively implement the Action Plan.

Recommendations

The teacher researchers believe the obstacles above could be addressed by modifying the strategies used in the implementation. In order to support students who lack motivation and do not appear to approach Writer's Workshop with enthusiasm, the following strategies may prove to be helpful: teacher or peer assistance in generating lists of possible topics for writing, teacher-student conference times used to help students explore areas of interest or knowledge,

partnerships with motivated and skilled peers with the purpose of collaborative writing. Another strategy which may be effective for students who lack motivation is an individualized guided writing experience with the teacher. The teacher might begin by assisting the student with the often difficult process of beginning the writing piece, and provide direction by asking stimulating and appropriate questions. These questions might address such areas as, developing an interesting plot, creating a logical sequence, adding details, and varying sentence structure. Using this method, the teacher would be able to prompt and coach the student through the writing process.

To address the issue of low level fluency, teachers may wish to allow the students to dictate their ideas as a means of focusing on the cognitive processes of writing, rather than the mechanics and conventions.

The problems relating to insufficient time for Writer's Workshop may be difficult to solve due to school schedules and curricular requirements. Whenever possible, it is recommended that workshop time be at least one hour in length. Students frequently spend a large amount of time performing prewriting activities such as gathering supplies, choosing a topic, and discussing ideas. If the Writing Workshop time is less than an hour, students will have little opportunity to accomplish the primary goal which is to create and compose.

Another recommendation related to scheduling concerns Author's Chair. The First and Second Grade students were anxious to share their writing and asked to have Author's Chair scheduled more often. Teachers implementing this Action Plan will find that planning frequent and consistent time for Author's Chair, or opportunities for student's to share their writing, will be beneficial.

The researchers believe with the implementation of this Action Plan students will develop their written language skill, improve fluency, and may come to enjoy writing in its entirety.

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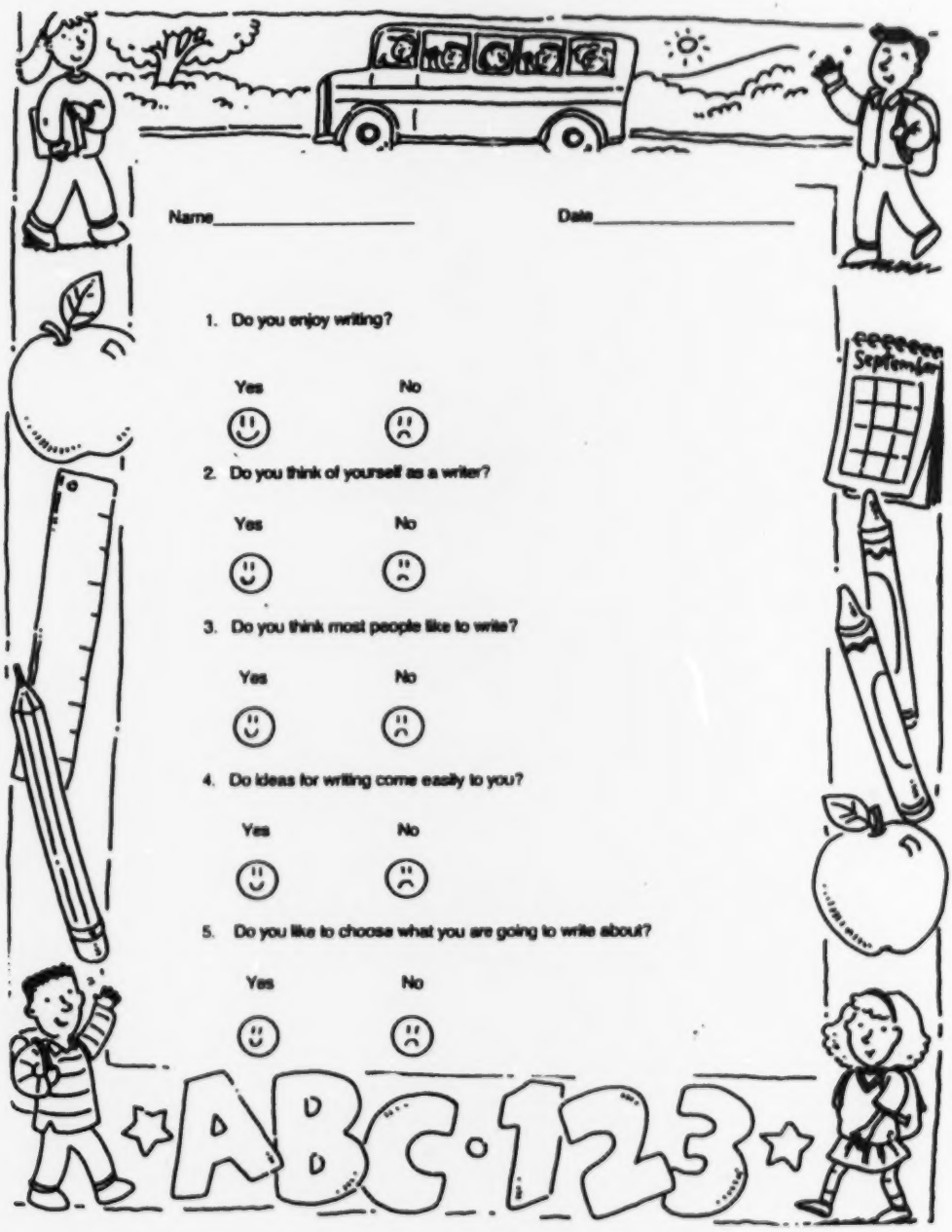
APPENDICES

Appendix A
Student Writing Survey


Name_____ Date_____
1. Do you enjoy writing?
Yes No
2. Do you think of yourself as a writer?
Yes No
3. Do you think most people like to write?
Yes No
4. Do ideas for writing come easily to you?
Yes No
5. Do you like to choose what you are going to write about?
Yes No
ABC·123

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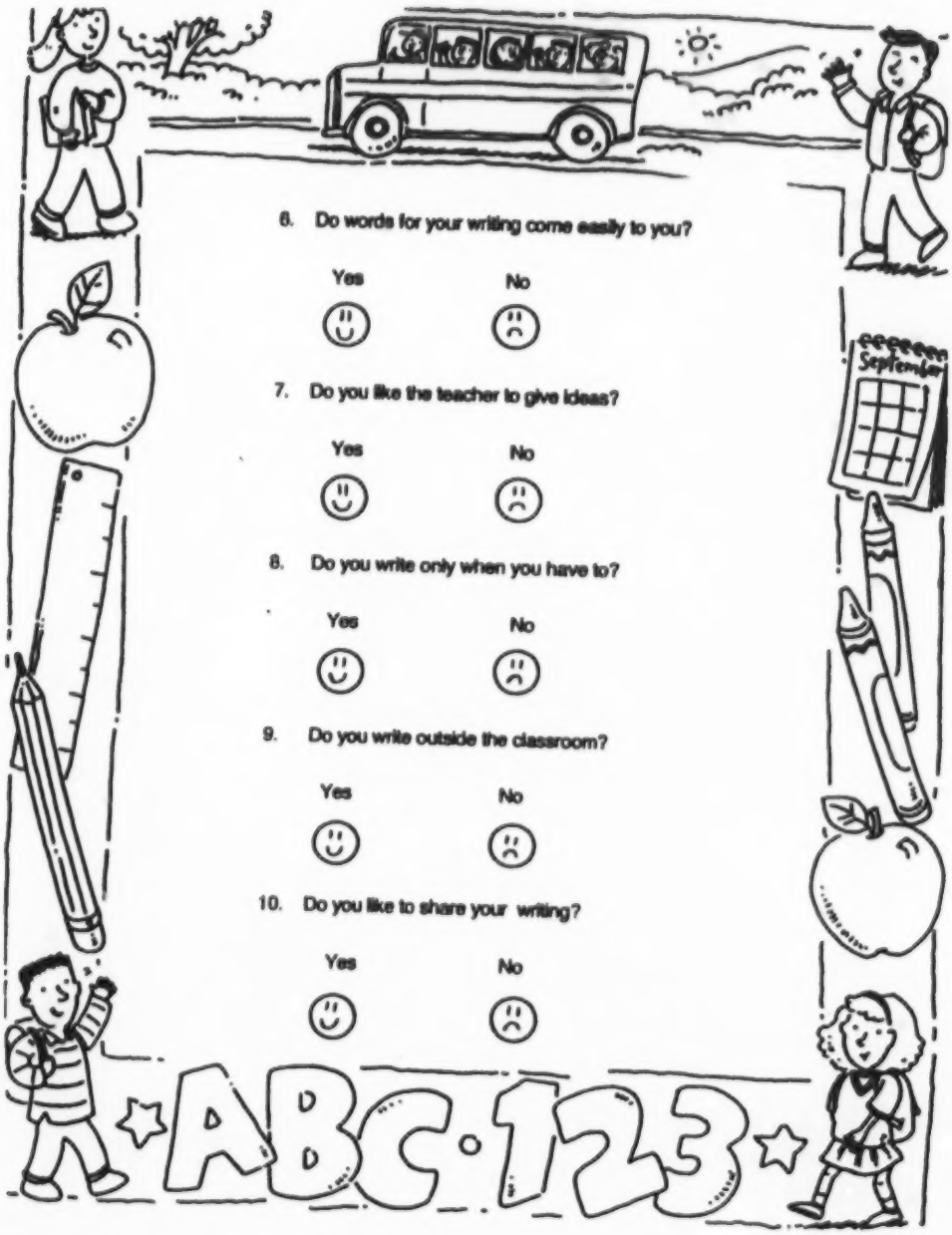
6. Do words for your writing come easily to you?
Yes
No
7. Do you like the teacher to give ideas?
Yes
No
8. Do you write only when you have to?
Yes
No
9. Do you write outside the classroom?
Yes
No
10. Do you like to share your writing?
Yes
No
September
ABC·123

Appendix B

Teacher Survey

1. Do you feel ISAT testing and reported scores influence the way you teach writing?

   Yes Somewhat No

2. Do you think ISAT testing and reported scores influence the amount of time you spend teaching writing?

   Yes Somewhat No

3. Do you use writing across the curriculum?

   Yes Somewhat No

4. Are you comfortable allowing your students to use inventive spelling?

   Yes Somewhat No

5. How often do you let children write without being edited?

   Rarely Sometimes Frequently

6. How often do you feel your students lack motivation during free writing opportunities?

   Rarely Sometimes Frequently

7. How often do you provide prompts for your students writing?

   Rarely Sometimes Frequently

8. How often do you allow children to share their writing with their peers?

   Rarely Sometimes Frequently

9. How much time on average do your students spend on writing activities?

   _____ hours per week

10. Of the total time spent on writing activities per week, approximately how much of that time is spent on student choice?

    _____ hours per week

11. How important do you think it is for students to use creativity in their writing?

    Very important Somewhat important Not important

12. How would you describe the attitudes of your students towards writing?

    Enthusiastic Neutral Negative

Appendix C

Story Starter

One very dark, spooky night I was camping in the woods. I heard a strange noise and

Appendix D

Story Starter

Yesterday a monkey climbed through the window at school and . . .

Appendix E

Story Starter

One sunny day I was walking to school. I heard a strange noise and . . .